

**KAWAGUCHI Yasuhiro Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of
Japan to the Republic of Latvia
The speech at Conferment Ceremony of Certificate of Commendation**

30 September, 2021

Ms Beitnere-Le Galla, Deputy Speaker of Saeima, Mr Zariņš, Deputy State Secretary for Cultural Policy and distinguished guests.

It is an honour to welcome all of you to the ceremony to confer the Certificate of Commendation. This commendation honours individuals or groups publicly in recognition of their outstanding contributions or benevolences made in cooperation with Japan and the missions of the Embassy of Japan.

This year, Japan and Latvia celebrate the centenary since Japan recognized Latvia de jure. In the milestone year, I decided to present my commendation to express our gratitude and appreciation for three individuals and one organization, following the Group for Promoting cooperation with the Parliament of Japan on 15 September.

They played important roles in cultural exchanges between Japan and Latvia for a long time in different fields, namely music, literature, education, and sports, thus strengthening bilateral relations, deepening friendship and promoting mutual understanding between Japan and Latvia.

Before awarding the certificate of commendation, I would like to introduce each of their achievements briefly.

Music

In music, Ms Aira Birziņa has played a crucial role in the exchange of choirs between Japan and Latvia and thus has contributed to the strengthening of bilateral relations and the promotion of understanding between Japan and Latvia through music.

She has been the conductor of Dzintars, a prestigious Latvian women's choir, since 2000. The choir established a friendly relationship with the Glee Club of Waseda University in 1993. Since then, the two choirs have actively visited each other. Their exchanges led to the establishment of the Japan-Latvia Music Association in

2005. The Association continues to support and promote exchanges between two countries.

She has also been the conductor of the Riga Cathedral Women's Choir "Tiara" since 2000. The choir has been in exchange with the NHK Tokyo Children's Choir. In 2018, the two choirs gave a concert together when the NHK Tokyo Children's Choir visited Latvia.

Literature

In literature, Ms Inguna Bekele has been translating Japanese literary works to the Latvian language. Thus, she has contributed to the dissemination of Japanese literature and the understanding of Japan in Latvia.

She has studied the Japanese language under Dr Edgars Kattai and studied Japanese in Kobe in 1993.

She has translated works by famous Japanese novelists such as Yukio Mishima and Haruki Murakami to the Latvian language.

Her published translation works are so far 10, including Yukio Mishima's "Kinkakuji" (The Temple of the Golden Pavilion), Haruki Murakami's "*Ichī-Kyū-Hachi-Yon*" (1Q84), and "Umibe no Kafuka" (Kafka on the Shore).

Thanks to the product of her many years of labour, Haruki Murakami's works are widely known and one of the most treasured foreign writers in Latvia, some speculates. I am sure that her translation from Japanese to Latvian allowed many readers to appreciate his works in Latvian.

Education

In education, since 2001, Riga Culture Secondary School has contributed to education on Japanese as the only secondary school that offers Japanese language education in Latvia. The school has been engaged in educational activities to teach children about various cultures, traditions and languages. Continuing the tradition of its predecessor, the school has emphasized education in Japan.

Mr Martins Berzins, the vice-principal of the school, studied a post-graduate course at the Naruto University of Education in 2010. Since then, in his capacity of the current position, he has been instrumental in establishing a system for teaching Japanese culture, tradition and language.

In practice, Mr Harusaku Kondo has given lessons there since 2013. He is one of the two Japanese teachers in Latvia.

The school contributed to the promotion of understanding of Japan and the increase of the younger generation's interests in Japan. Many students from the school have participated in the annual Japanese speech contest and have won many prizes.

Students from the school also have participated in training programs offered by the Japan Foundation and the Japan Latvian Society in Kansai.

Sports

Lastly, in sports, Mr Vsevolodz Zelionis has played a vital role in the promotion of Judo in Latvia as an athlete besides a coach.

As an athlete, he was a member of the Latvian National Team from 1992 to 2008 selected to go to four Olympics: 1992 Barcelona, 2000 Sydney, 2004 Athens, and 2008 Beijing. At the Sydney Olympics, he became the first Latvian Judo player to win a bronze medal.

As an instructor, he established a sports school in 2012 to teach and promote judo to the younger generation. The school has produced prizewinners of the European Championships and Olympic athletes, thus has made a significant contribution to the spread of judo by holding Judo camps and Judo classes at schools not only in Latvia but also in Estonia, Finland, Russia, and Spain.

Furthermore, since 2000, he has been working as an executive committee member of the Latvian Judo Federation; since 2017, he has served as its Secretary-General. His activities at the European Judo Federation and the Latvian Olympic Committee have also contributed to the judo in Latvia.

These are just a few examples of their many contributions over the years. As Ambassador of Japan to Latvia, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of them for their outstanding contributions.

This year mark the centenary of our friendship between Japan and Latvia. You could now enjoy the “online photo exhibition” featuring the history of a 100-year Friendship at our Embassy’s Twitter account.

The victory of the small Far Eastern island nation over the Baltic Fleet left from Liepaja in 1905 marked the historic turning point in Japan. The defeat upset the Russian Empire and led to the independence of Latvia, eventually.

Japan and Latvia share fundamental values and principles such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, Japan and Latvia are geographically far apart. Even maintaining a relationship requires effort and attention.

I believe we are required to cultivate the relationship continuously. Your support would be precious and indispensable to do that.

For 100 years, our bilateral relations have been making steady progress in a wide range of fields.

Three distinguished persons and one school conferred today are great contributors in this regard; I wish you would continue to be so.

With your valuable support, I earnestly hope the relations between our two countries evermore flourish.

Thank you.